

CONTAINERS OF DIVINITY

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In Polynesia, as in many cultural traditions, religion was (and is) the progenitor of important works of art. Made on commission by artists or by religious specialists, the objects become imbued with sacred qualities and aspects of divinity. Such objects/works of art include representations of the gods, decorative and protective garments, special wrappings and containers, and “relics”, such as bones, hair or other physical remains. In Polynesia, many gods derived from *mana*-bearing people of rank who had become ancestor gods; the figures of these gods and stories about their divinity are widely known. But, just how did objects (which could be considered only representations of the gods), relics, wrappings and containers acquire their *mana*, their power, their sacredness, their divinity?

Here I am interested in the special wrappings and containers for divinity, how these added sacredness to the objects they contained, and how divinity became embedded into objects, their wrappings and their containers. I explore these concepts through a discussion of godhouses, from Tahiti and the Tuamotus, as well as of a series of sennit god figures, *to 'o*, and their Polynesian contexts. Looking at these objects as containers of divinity, I explore possible relationships among the containers and the *to 'o*, and what they contained. I also look at the theatricality of the sacred rites that gave the objects divinity in order to reposition these performative arts to centre stage. Along the way I recycle some of the work of an early anthropologist, Kenneth P. Emory, by reviewing some of his comments, as well as the comments of others, about godhouses and *to 'o*. Finally, I re-evaluate and elaborate the comments of these earlier anthropologists and make my own conclusions.

SENNIT AS CONTAINER AND CONTAINERS FOR SENNIT

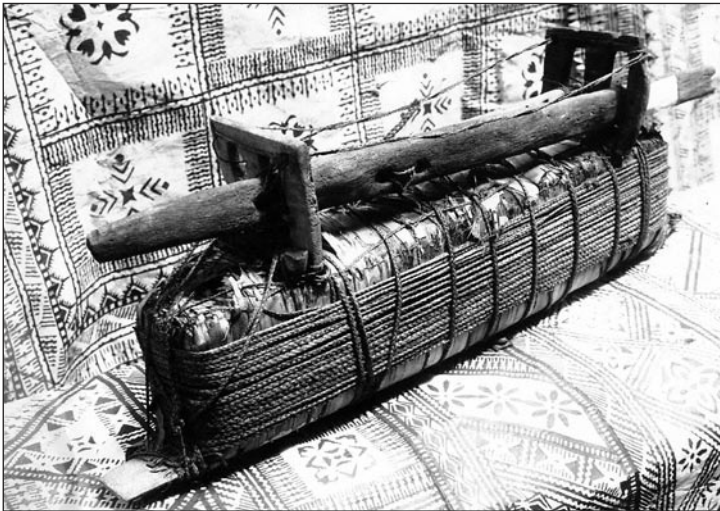
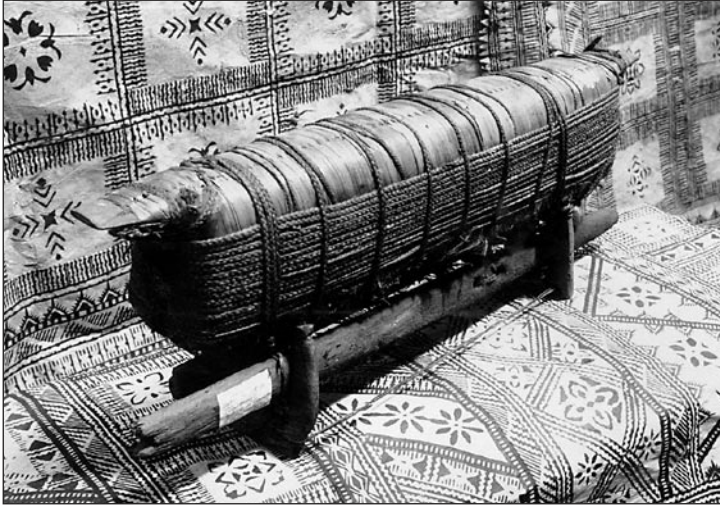
If we look at examples of Tahitian¹ sennit god figures, *to 'o*, what is the god (or its representation) and what is the wrapping or container? How many layers of wrapping are there and why? How does the fabrication of the wrapping, as well as the process of wrapping and unwrapping, add to the sacred quality of an object? I will be suggesting that it is a combination of the product and the process of fabrication and wrapping that makes something sacred and divine.

My interest in godhouses began while visiting the Missionary Museum at the Vatican in August 1997 where I saw a beautifully wrapped rectangular object (Figs 1-2).² It was in an exhibit called “Cult of the Dead”, and from its labelling appeared to be Tahitian. The object was a wooden box mounted on carrying poles and beautifully encased in white pandanus leaves that were held in place with braided coconut-fibre sennit. Its history was unclear, but it reminded me of three other objects: (i) an illustration by John Webber, made during Cook’s third voyage (Fig. 3), (ii) the unique four-legged container in the British Museum carved of wood (Fig. 4), and (iii) the pandanus wrappings of the sennit figures that had been acquired in Tahiti by Kenneth Emory and are now in the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu (Fig. 5).

Were all of these objects related, and if so, how? I consulted Teuira Henry’s book, *Ancient Tahiti*, and found therein a description of the transport of god figures, especially the Tahitian god ‘Oro, which was associated with a container that seemed to be somewhat like a combination of the two now in the Vatican and the British Museum. According to Henry (1928:136), ‘Oro was transported in a special receptacle, *fare atua* ‘lit. godhouse’, the first of which was made by the god Ta‘aroa (the father of ‘Oro) out of his own body:

It was a neat little ark made of sacred polished wood, with arched roof covered with *fara* thatch, square at each end and having a level floor. Its dimensions were about four feet [1.2m] long, two and a half feet [76cm] wide, and three feet [91cm] high, varying in size according to the form of the god that was placed in it. One end was closed. The other end had a circular entrance for the god, with a close-fitting stopper of sacred cloth. To this ark were attached cords of sacred sennit,³ which were passed under it to either side, forming a loop at each corner, through which polished poles of miro wood were passed that extended far enough for two men at each end to bear upon their shoulders. The ark containing the god rested between.

This house was modeled on Ta‘aroa’s own empty body “and it became a model for all other god’s houses”. In emptying his body, Ta‘aroa had formed the heaven, earth, sea and their inhabitants. The empty body was carried “into the holy of holies of the temple. The backbone was the ridgepole, the ribs were the supporters of the god’s house, the breast-bone was the capping of the roof, and the thigh-bones became the carved ornaments around the god’s house” (Henry 1928:426). Henry notes further, “When Ta‘aroa shook off his feathers, they became trees, plantain clusters, and verdure on the land.... Red and yellow feathers were supposed to be the covering of the gods in the beginning. Hair it is said first appeared on the head of the god Tane and was called *rimu* (moss) by the other deities” (1928:338).



Figures 1 and 2. *Fare atua* 'godhouse' (right side up and upside down) from the Tuamotu Islands in the Missionary Museum of the Vatican. Photographs by Kenneth Emory when they were in the Lateran Museum, Rome. (Courtesy Bishop Museum, Honolulu.)

Except for the “circular entrance for the god” in Henry’s description of the godhouse, the Vatican container had many elements of that description, while the container in the British Museum had such a circular entrance for the god.

According to Henry, the god figures transported in such containers were *to’o*. These figures were of various sizes and consisted of the assemblage of a piece of wood, wrapped in a complex covering of coconut-fibre sennit, to which red feathers were attached. They may have had anthropomorphic features delineated by the addition of strips of sennit which sometimes created human features of a face, arms, hands, and a navel. These sacred *to’o* were periodically activated or renewed in a ritual called *pa’iatua* (Henry 1928:157-77; see also Babadzan 1981:13-18, 1993) during which the gods were assembled, uncovered and re-dressed at a national *marae* ‘outdoor temple’ for an important occasion, such as the installation of a high chief and seasonal ritual junctures, or at times of crisis. The *marae* was cleaned, the sacred white *pu’upu’u* barkcloth was prepared, and cordage sacred to the god Tane was readied. The essence of the ritual was to reveal the material aspect of the god and the renewal of its activating ingredients. The *to’o* was carried to the *marae* in his ‘godhouse’ (the sacred container representing the god Ta’aroa) from the place where he lived when he was not being used in ritual, the *fare ia manaha* ‘house of sacred treasures’ in front of the *marae*. The lesser gods of medical practitioners, canoe builders, fishermen and sorcerers were presented to the *to’o* along with offerings of red feathers;



Figure 3. *Fare atua*, Society Islands. Drawing by John Webber from the third voyage of Captain Cook, 1777. (Courtesy Bishop Museum, Honolulu.)

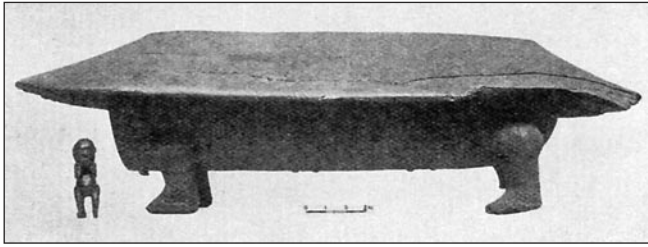


Figure 4. Godhouse (LMS 120) with little god figure (LMS 98). *British Museum Handbook* (1925:164).

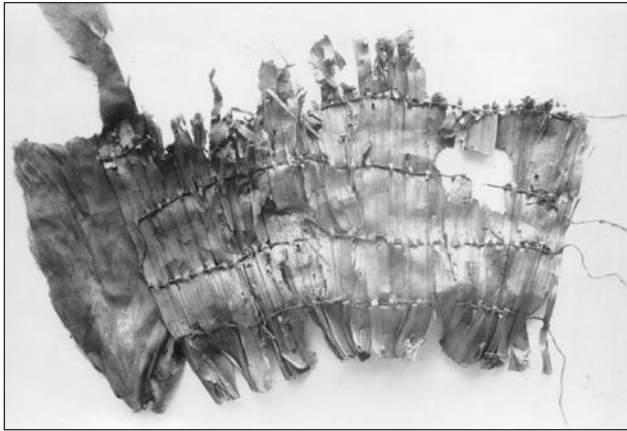


Figure 5. Pandanus wrappings from a bundle of *to'o* from Tahiti. Bishop Museum, Honolulu. (Photo courtesy Bishop Museum.)

the *to'o*, in turn, gave feathers to the lesser gods. Newly made images were also brought to be inspired by the *to'o* and its priests. This process gave the lesser gods their sanctity.

The old vestments of the *to'o* were removed, placed in a sacred spot on the *marae* and left to decompose. The wood part of the *to'o* was rubbed with scented coconut oil and a sacred male pig was sacrificed. The *to'o* was dressed in its new vestments of fine sennit and red feathers, and reactivated by incantations of the priests. Thus, all the images, *to'o* and the lesser *ti'i* (wooden images), were sanctified to enable them to carry out their duties until the next *pa'iatua* took place. These rituals were necessary in order to renew the established relationships among the gods, the universe and the



Figure 6. *To'o* placed in the opening of a Society Islands' *fare atua*, LMS 120. British Museum, London. (© The Trustees of The British Museum.)

people, while at the same time they displayed hierarchical principles related to heredity and power. Although anyone could gaze upon a *ti'i*, only those of certain status could gaze upon a *to'o*, and only specialists could touch and renew them. Renewal was done with sacred fibres and red feathers.

The wooden container now in the British Museum (Fig. 4) was thought to be a container for small wooden gods by the British Museum and by Emory (British Museum 1925:164, Emory 1947:27). Carved from a single piece of wood,⁴ the container's aperture seemed to me, however, to be the right size for a *to'o* image and I had the container re-photographed with a *to'o* in its aperture to show that it would be a perfect fit (Fig. 6). Instead of a "shrine for the figure of a goddess", as it was called in the British Museum *Handbook* (1925:164), I suggest that it is a *fare atua* for a *to'o*, that is, a representation of the god Ta'arua, which is a container for a sacred sennit representation of 'Oro or some other god. Thus, the *fare atua* is divine and is the container for another divine. The sennit god and its wooden *fare atua* also appear to represent male and female fertility and thereby to embed the important Polynesian concept of male/female complementarity in androgynous representation, an important feature of Polynesian gods (Kaepler 1997a:66-70).

TO'O FROM COOK'S VOYAGES

Let us now look further at the *to'o* themselves, which have various forms. Most of the known *to'o* are in museum collections and have little collection data. At least three were collected during the voyages of Captain Cook (Kaepler 1978:136-38). One has not been located, but it was drawn by Sarah Stone (Fig. 7), an artist who illustrated objects in the Leverian Museum (Kaepler, forthcoming). Another, drawn by John Frederick Miller (Fig. 8), is

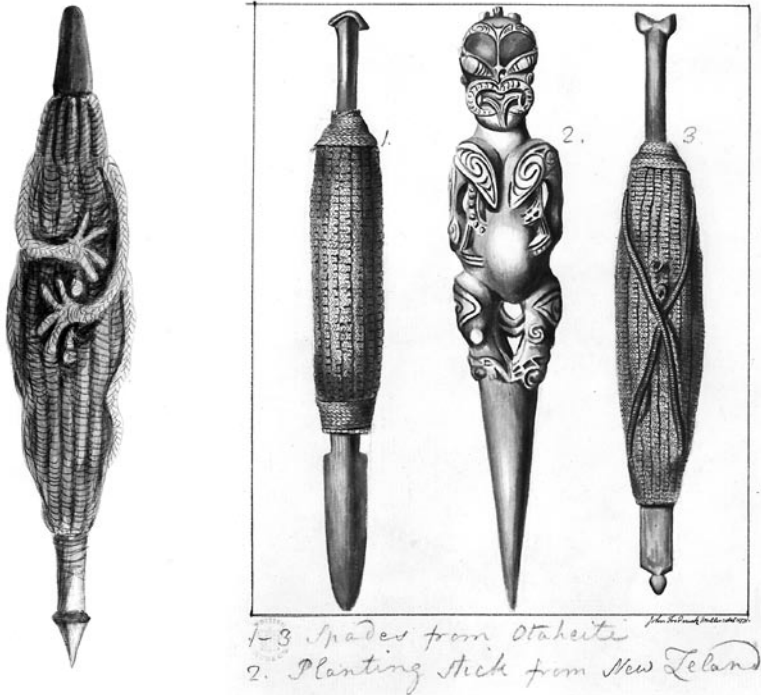


Figure 7. (left): *To'o* collected during one of the voyages of Captain Cook (probably the second voyage). Drawing by Sarah Stone in the Leverian Museum, c.1783. (Courtesy Australian Museum Research Library.)

Figure 8. (right): Drawing by John Frederick Miller of two *to'o* collected during the first voyage of Captain Cook. British Library Add. Ms. 15508.26. (© The British Library. All rights reserved.)

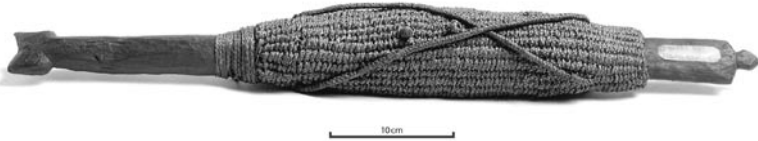


Figure 9. *To'o* collected during the first voyage of Captain Cook. British Museum (TAH 64). (© The Trustees of The British Museum.)

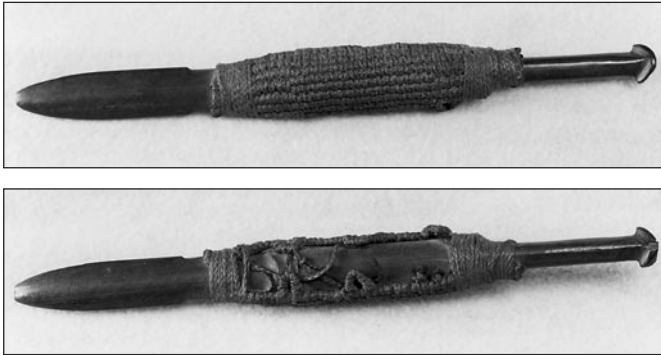


Figure 10. Both sides of a *to'o* collected during the first voyage of Captain Cook. Formerly in the collection of K. J. Hewett (present location unknown). (Photo: John C. Wright.)

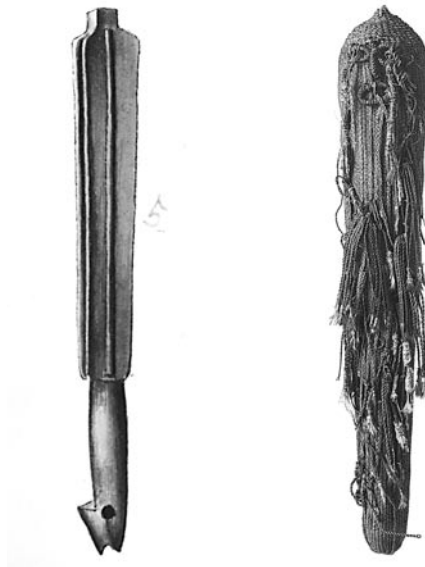


Figure 11. (left): Carved wooden object from the first voyage of Captain Cook, which may be the centre for a *to'o*. Detail from a drawing by John Frederick Miller, 1771. British Library Add. MS 23921, f.57(a). (© The British Library. All rights reserved.)

Figure 12. (right): *To'o* with attachments of sennit and feathers. Alphonse Moillet collection, Musée d'Histoire Naturelle d'Ethnographie de Lille, France. (Photo: Philip Bernard.)

in the British Museum (TAH 64; Fig. 9). A third, also depicted by Miller, was at one time in the collection of K. John Hewett (Fig. 10). Another object, which may be the wood part of a *to'o*, was also drawn by Miller and is also in the British Museum (TAH 65; Fig. 11). These *to'o* are unlike most *to'o* collected later, in that the wooden part projects at both ends of the wrapped sennit. One of the early references to *to'o* notes: “They were carefully wound round with very fine cinet, *the extremities alone remaining visible*” (Ellis 1829[II]:205: my emphasis). It is notable that the sennit of the Hewett figure is loosely attached by loops, and could be “dressed” and “undressed” quickly.

The earliest known examples of the more “classic” *to'o*, which are either entirely covered with sennit or have a small section of wood extending at the lower end, were collected slightly later by members of the London Missionary Society and others sojourners. According to most sources, a *to'o* consists of a piece of wood, wrapped in a complex vestment of coconut-fibre sennit and red feathers. At least two classic *to'o* visibly have a wooden core—a *to'o* in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkerkunde, Leiden (Kooijman 1964:116), and the *to'o* in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (E1907.342)—because the wood projects from the bottom (Kaeppler 1979:150). The *to'o* now in Lille (Fig. 12) was scanned and showed a wood core (Hooper 2006:177). The addition of anthropomorphic features is apparently not necessary.

Just to be more certain about the centre containing a piece of wood, Roger Neich and Julia Gresson of the Auckland Museum had two *to'o* scanned for me by computed tomography (CT).⁵ The scan of AM31575 (Oldman 468), shown here in Figure 13 a and b, shows that a piece of wood is fully enclosed in an outer covering of sennit and that there are several layers of other fibrous materials. However, the scan of AM31576 (Oldman 365), shown here in Figure 13 c, d and e, *most surprisingly* shows that this *to'o*, collected by George Bennet, does *not* have a piece of wood in the centre, but is made up entirely of fibrous materials covered with sennit. Included in this mélange are short pieces of braided/twisted strips of sennit (which I will suggest below are objectified prayers).

FOUR DOCUMENTED *TO'O*

Here, I now place on record the documentation for four *to'o*, three of which have not been previously studied or published (Bishop Museum, B10548 a-d). In 1925, Kenneth Emory acquired for Bishop Museum a single *to'o* and three *to'o* wrapped in a bundle that were found in a bluff-shelter in the valley of Orofere, Tahiti. They were in a wall, east of the paved platform at Amou.⁶ (See Appendix for full documentation as recorded by Emory.)

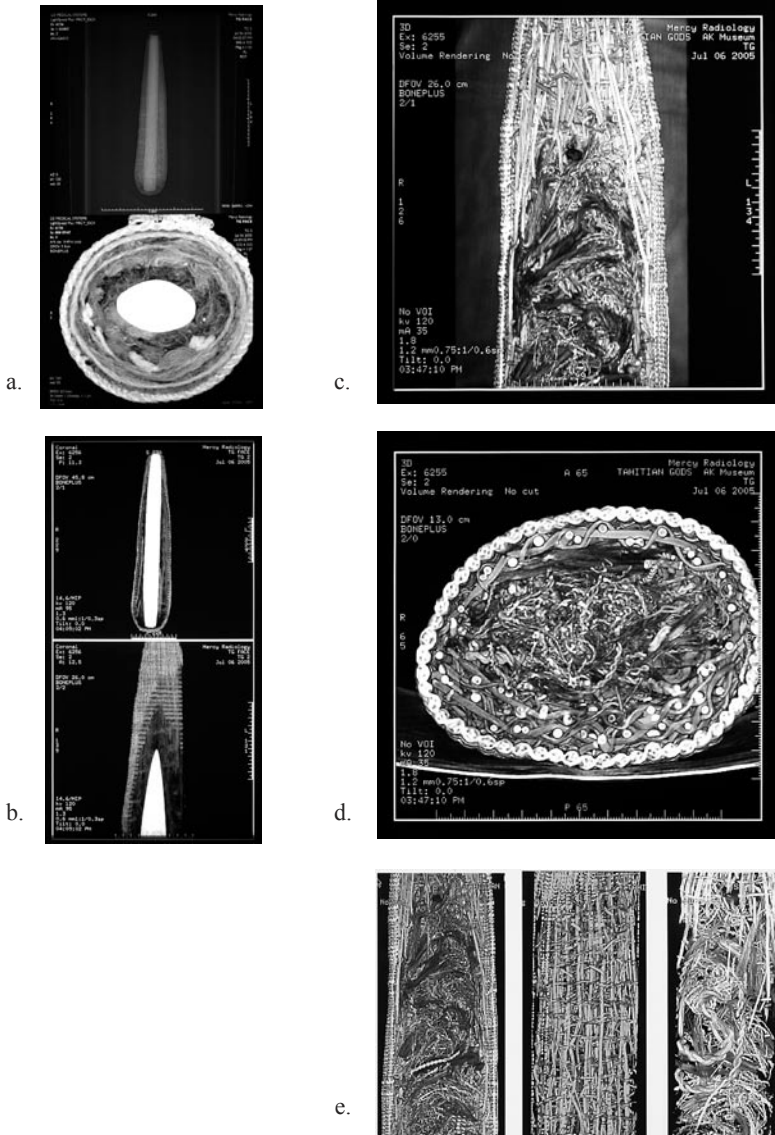


Figure 13. (a-e) Five CT scans of two *to'o* (AM31575 and AM31576) from the Oldman collection in the Auckland Museum. (CT scans by Mercy Radiology, Auckland, New Zealand.)

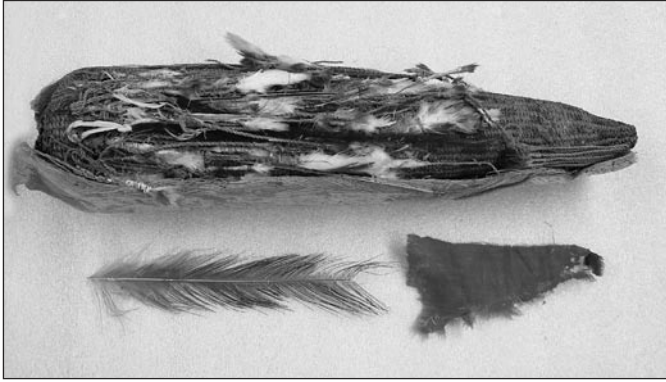


Figure 14. *To'o* (B10548a) with its embellishments of feathers and red cloth strip. Bishop Museum, Honolulu. (Photo courtesy Bishop Museum.)

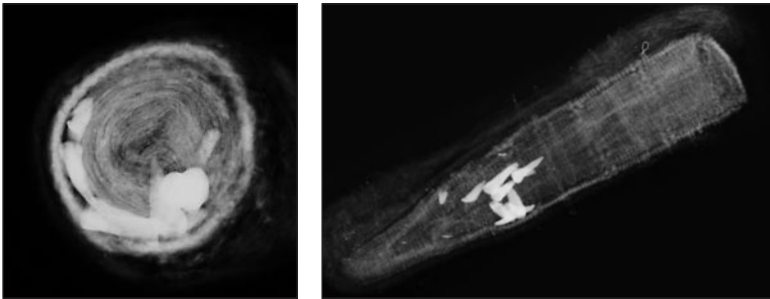


Figure 15. (a & b): X-rays of *to'o* (Bishop Museum, B10548c) showing human teeth and no wood core. (X-rays by Castle Medical Center in Kailua, Oahu; photograph of X-rays, Smithsonian Institution.)

One of the *to'o* (B10548a) retains its embellishments of human hair, a strip of red cotton cloth, a long reddish feather, and the quill of what appears to be a tail feather of a red-tailed tropic bird (Fig. 14). In addition, there are adornments of hair and several strands of braided coconut fibre sennit with red and yellow feather attachments similar to those added to the outside of the figure now in Lille (Fig. 12) and the twisted/braided strips of sennit in the interior of one of the Auckland *to'o* (Fig. 13). Another *to'o* (B10549b) had been X-rayed (date unknown), and again surprisingly “*showed no bones or anything*” (emphasis mine; see Appendix). Especially interesting are the wrappings of the three *to'o* that were found together in a bundle (see Appendix

Figs 23a-z). The outer wrappings are long whitish pandanus leaves sewn together with hibiscus fibre (Fig. 5); inside are wrappings of layers of soft barkcloth, layers of fine barkcloth and pieces of coconut leaf sheath, i.e., the fibrous integument from the top of coconut palms.⁷

As the earlier X-ray of B10548b could not be found, we decided to have all four *to 'o* X-rayed.⁸ Surprisingly again, none of the four *to 'o* have a piece of wood in the interior. The interiors of three of the *to 'o* show nothing more dense than the outer layer of sennit and appear to be of barkcloth and other sennit-like material. The fourth *to 'o* is filled with similar materials and a series of human teeth. According to Smithsonian physical anthropologist David Hunt, the teeth could all have come from one individual of some age, as the occlusal surfaces and crowns show significant wear (Fig. 15).

From the above two sections, an important question arises: How do we explain that at least five *to 'o* do not have a wooden core? My predecessors who analysed rituals associated with *to 'o* seemed to feel that it was the piece of wood that was important and the sennit merely a wrapping. Conversely, I suggest that the piece of wood is incidental, and it is the sennit part of the image that is important. The sennit contains the entangled prayers that make the *to 'o* divine. I believe that the so-called “wrapping” refers to layers of barkcloth and/or pandanus leaves, which were also sacred owing to the prayers that had been chanted during the dressing and undressing of the sennit *to 'o*. The important point here is that a wood core, which was previously considered important, appears to be only incidental.

THREE TUAMOTUAN CONTAINERS

We return now to the container in the Missionary Museum (Figs 1-2). The Vatican documentation indicates that the ‘godhouse’ was not from Tahiti but from Tematangi Island in the Tuamotus⁹ (about 570 miles southeast of Tahiti). As it is entirely closed, there was no easy way to find out what is in it. According to Vatican records, Tematangi was converted to Catholicism between 1881 and 1885 by Father Germain Fierens and Father Vincent-de-Paul Terlyn of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Picpus. One of the missionaries, familiar with the Tuamotuan island Hao, noted that such coffins contained hair, fish or whale teeth, and sennit. They were like mausoleums in which remains of ancestors and objects associated with them were retained. On religious days and special occasions the godhouses were carried to the *marae*. These occasions included funeral ceremonies, feasts, and dancing.

A Godhouse in the Bishop Museum, Honolulu

Now having a Tuamotuan identification, I consulted Emory’s *Tuamotuan Religious Structures and Ceremonies* (1947). To my surprise Emory not only

notes the existence of the Vatican godhouse but two other similar godhouses, which he illustrates and calls *fare tini atua*. These are in the Bishop Museum and in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen (Emory 1947:22-27, Plate 1). Neither of them was in the pristine condition of the Vatican example, and consequently revealed further information about the houses and their contents. By the time I worked at Bishop Museum in the 1970s, the godhouse in that collection had completely disintegrated, but I did remember some tufts of hair enclosed in bamboo tubes. The Bishop Museum godhouse from Negonego Island came from the J.L. Young Collection in 1920. It is described in the museum records for B3569 as follows:

165 Wooden box found in 1886 in a sandheap on Nengonengo Island, buried alongside a skeleton, evidently its former owner, who from the condition of the teeth appeared to have been a very old man. It was found on the left side of the skeleton, preserved by the dry sand for not less than a hundred years it is believed.

This box contains: 2 pieces of bamboo with hair of relatives tied round with fine cinet. 1 wooden comb. 1 pearlshell hook partly made. 1 bone dagger or thatching needle of human bone. 3 pieces of wood hollowed on one side, which had probably contained hair. 3 small pieces of wood.

The box when found contained decayed fragments of a fine mat in which the articles described had been wrapped. It is probable that the pieces of shell hooks and the little bone dagger were the objects last handled by the dead man which were buried with him according to custom.

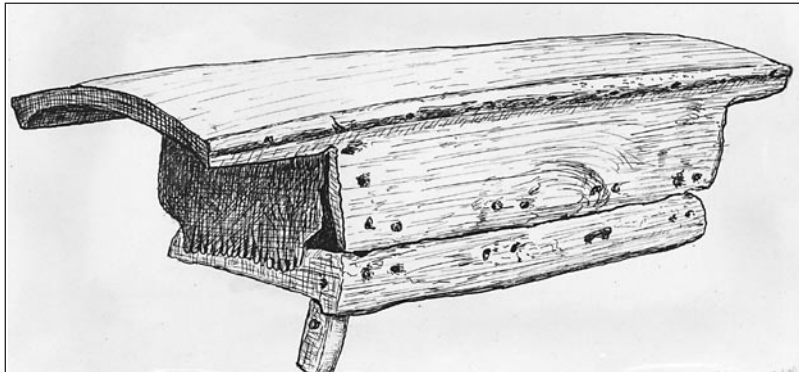


Figure 16. Drawing of the Tuamotuan *fare atua* (B3569) formerly in the Bishop Museum. (Courtesy Bishop Museum, Honolulu.)

Emory's further description notes that the top, sides and one end were carved in one piece; the floor with four legs was another piece; and a door that closed the other end was a third piece, which was lashed to the house (Fig. 16). The wood was said to be *tou* (*Cordia subcordata*)¹⁰ and the object was accompanied by a pearl shell fishhook and a turtle bone needle for piercing pandanus leaves in preparing them for thatch sheets. Emory's entry continues:

One of the bamboo receptacles is a fragment of drift bamboo, open along one side and end. The locks of hair with which it is filled are kept in place by coir braid wrapped a number of times around the bamboo. One of the locks of hair is seized at one end by a single strand of coconut-husk fiber. The other bamboo container, also a drift piece, is even smaller—6.5 inches [c. 16.5cm] long and 0.8 inch [c. 2cm] in diameter—and holds three thick locks of black hair. One of the locks is laid for half its length along the quill of a white feather and then coiled tightly around itself and the feather. The feather might be the tail feather of a tropic bird. A second lock of hair, tied in the middle with a thin twine of fiber, probably from the *ogaoga* (*Fleurya ruderalis*) was laid beside the one wrapped with the feather, and the two were held together by a thread of coconut fiber. A third lock of hair lay loose in the container.

In a groove of one of the three lengths of *piupiu* (*Tournefortia argentea*) wood lay a small stick of hard wood held in place by a wrapping of sennit braid. The outfit resembles a fire-making kit although the little hard-wood stick, pointed like a fire stick, seems too small for practical purposes. (Emory 1947:24-25)

A godhouse in the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen

The Copenhagen godhouse is similar, also carved in the same three pieces with the door lashed on with braided sennit (Fig. 17). Each of the houses contained tufts of hair encased in bamboo or cylindrical pieces of wood, along with feathers and pandanus wrappings held together by braided sennit. The Copenhagen objects had wrappings of blue calico, while the Bishop Museum objects had wrappings of a fine mat. Both godhouses have holes along the edge of the roof, which served for the sewing on of pandanus-leaf roofing (Emory 1947:25). The Copenhagen Museum godhouse, which came to the museum in 1881 from M. De Nozeille from Paris, was described by Helge Larsen (1941:242-44):

The hut consists of two pieces of wood, bottom and top, held together by strings of plaited coir. The bottom rested on four low, foursided legs, only one of which is intact and 2.6 cm. high. Along the two long sides runs a down-turned comb, in which are teeth of different length, some of them broken off... the row of teeth on one side has been restored by tying on a piece of wood

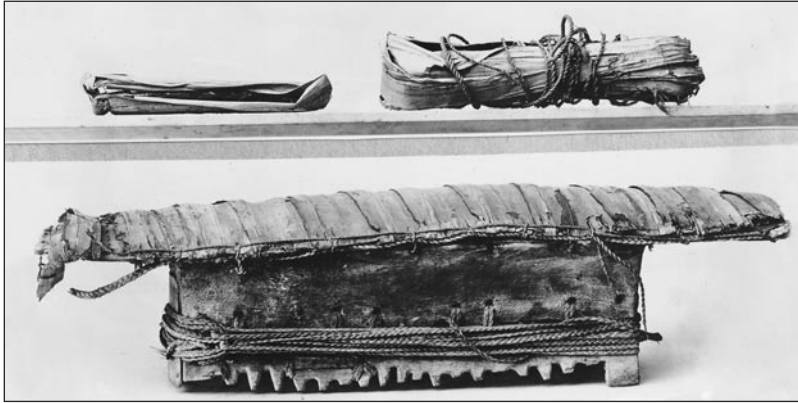


Figure 17. Tuamotuan *fare atua* in the National Museum of Denmark, Ethnographic collection. (Photo courtesy National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.)

with four teeth. The bottom inside and out is flat, but uneven. In the upper edge of the bottom piece are twenty holes, eight on each long side and four in the closed gable. In nineteen of these holes is a double or triple lashing of plaited coir to tie the bottom to the top. The latter, with walls and roof, is carved out of one piece of wood. The walls slope slightly outwards to meet the roof, which forms a low vault and at the gables projects 12.5 cm., but along the sides only 1 or 2 mm. The lower part of the walls is drilled with the same number of holes as the bottom for the lashing. Six of these holes are filled with lime, and there is more lime on the underside of the gable projection, on the underside of the bottom, on the closed gable wall and on the door and doorway. The door in one end is loose and fastened merely by a long coir braiding which is whipped ten times round the house above the joint between the upper and lower parts. The door itself is trapeziform, 17 cm. long and 9.2 cm. high, widest below and slightly convex from side to side. The under edge has faint serrations. On the inside of the door there is at the top a thicker part, rectangular with rounded corners, 13.5 cm. long and 6.4 cm. high, fitting the opening exactly. The roof is thatched with strips of pandanus laid crosswise over. They are held in position by a twisted coir cord along the edge and by a thin palm-leaf rib lying parallel to the long side of the roof. The thatching is also secured to the house with coir strings passing through holes in the upper edges of the long walls and in the edge of the roof. In all there are 28 holes for securing the thatch, but the string remains in only 13 of them. In the middle of the roof is an opening, about 6 cm. long, closed with a flat plug. The entire hut is 65 cm. long, 23 cm. wide and 16.5 cm. high.

Two packages were found inside the godhouse. One [A]:

is wound about with a piece of coir twine 2.54 m. long and consisting of three pieces tied together, two of them two-ply and one three-ply. Inside the string is a strip of palm leaf, 1.30 m. long and up to 6.5 cm. wide wrapped four times round the package. Inside this was another strip, 2 m. long and 6 cm. wide and likewise bent four times, whereas one end ran out in a point that was wrapped around the middle of the package. Inside was a cylindrical piece of wood, 23.5 cm. long and 3 cm. thick, hollowed out from both ends to form two cavities. On the outside of this cylinder is a dry, green coating on which are a number of very small shells (e.g. *Cardium*). A microscopic examination of the green coating showed that it was a marine sponge, and from the entire consistency it could be seen that it must have been laid about the cylinder while still wet. Furthermore, it was so arranged as to seal the openings of the two cavities; only one end was intact on examination. In one of the cavities was a plug, 5.6 cm. long, of curled up reddish-brown hair with a few grey hairs among it; in the other was a similar plug of hair and curled-up white feathers, 8.7 cm. long and tied together with a thin strip of fibre.

On the outside of B was a piece of palm leaf, 53 cm. long and 6 cm. wide and inside this was a package consisting of a bamboo tube wrapped in blue calico. Round about this was a winding of thin twisted coir, and inserted in this winding were two feathers, one white and one black, the black one completely covering the white. The tube is 17.3 cm. long and closed at one end. Inside it were eight white feathers tied together with a tuft of dark brown hair by a thin vegetable strip. This package was 14.7 cm. long.

A godhouse in the Missionary Museum, Vatican

The Vatican godhouse, as described by Fathers Fierens and Terlyn, was an “idol of the inhabitants of the island of Tematagi”¹¹ and was “divided in three compartments containing pig-teeth, human bones of ancestors, hair, and old men’s beards.” An examination of the godhouse suggests that one end is also a door.¹² According to the elders of Tematagi, whom Emory contacted through Paul Mazé in 1937, the object was:

a *kero* (basket) constructed to receive the gods (*atua*). According to Tahiri, the chest was suspended in the house of the priest. On indicated days it was carried to the marae. A person knelt before the chest and addressed himself to his ancestors believed to live there, to ask them for aid in his projects, especially for success in fishing. At the death of a father the chest went to his son, who deposited the bones and the hair of his father in the coffer. Thus it passed from generation to generation. (Emory 1947:27-28)

This takes us back to Henry's description of the Tahitian *fare atua*. Although the openings at one end are not circular in the Tuamotuan examples, these containers seem even more similar to Henry's description than the Tahitian example in the British Museum examined above.

To continue my exploration, I consulted with the conservators at the Vatican museum and they agreed to have the godhouse X-rayed.¹³ The X-rays (Figs 18a-b) show that there is only one compartment and the contents appear to be fibrous materials, such as sennit and hair. The Vatican report of 29/03/2004 by Prof. Ulderico Santamaria of the Scientific Laboratory was translated by Cesare Marino of the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution:

The principal aim of the radiographic analysis of the reliquary was to highlight the various elements that comprise the specimen. In order to determine the exact position of the elements revealed by the X-ray, a series of films were executed in two different projections, one perpendicular to the other.

The average distance focus-film, equal to 120 cm, guaranteed the limitation of the enlargement of the parts located at the greater distance from the surface of the film.

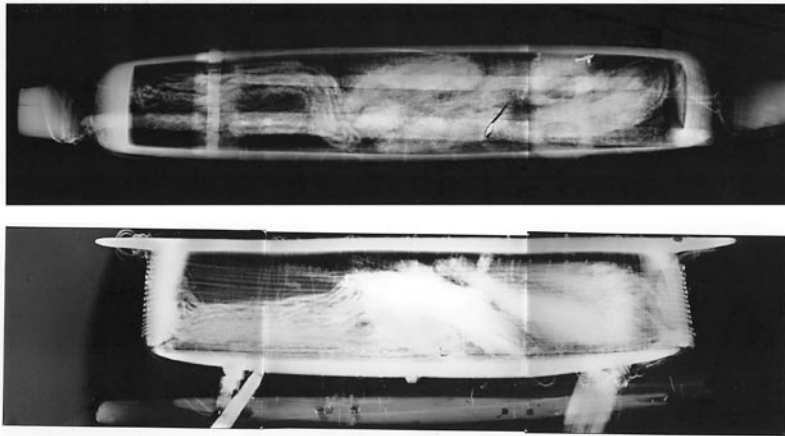


Figure 18. (a & b): Two X-rays of the interior of the *fare atua* in the Missionary Museum, Vatican. (X-rays Monumenti Musei e Gallerie Pontificie, consolidated into photographs by Donald Hurlbert, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

The X-ray images were made through a progressive increase of the parameters of exposure. Discussion of the Results:

In the specimen, of an elongated and rectangular shape, with dimensions of ca. 98 x 21 x 15 centimeters, it is distinguishable that the exterior part, or wrapping, is held at the two extremities by thin supports, and the interior chamber, two-thirds of which contain a series of objects similar to bundles of a tapered shape; the remaining space is occupied by a certain number of thick bundles of fibrous aspect, for the most part placed parallel to one another. One of these bundles, in the area near the rear of the chamber, bends to one side or about 90 degrees.

The fibers appear to be held together by thick strings tied in a spiral shape, and also the wrappings, in the number of 5-6, appear to be tied each one by a thin string twisted along the longitudinal axis [length] of the object.

Even though the content appears to be subdivided, the interior of the container appears to be a single chamber, without dividers.

Along the short side of the chamber, in correspondence with the space containing the bundles, it is noticeable the presence of a semicircular image with a weaving of fibers clearly visible and similar to a cloth. We can advance the hypothesis in this area the presence of a kind of a cap/cover that seals the interior. In the vicinity of the "cap" it is recognisable a round-shaped image, similar to a small coconut with clearly visible fibers and a braided string positioned around one of the extremities.

At the base of the support, in correspondence with the legs are noticeable two small objects of an elongated shape and of dimensions equal to 2-3 cm x 0.5 cm, very radiopaque, a fact which can be explained if we regard them to be metal objects. They are with every probability two hinges introduced as reinforcements in the area where the wood could fracture. The toned down and confused contours of these elements are presumably due to processes of oxidation.

One of the wooden boards present in the lower part of the specimen, in correspondence with the supports, appears to be crossed by thin channels (probably tunnels made by xylophagous insects).

Thus, it appears that the Vatican godhouse holds thick bundles of sennit similar to *to'o*, and a small container made of something more dense (such as a piece of bamboo or wood), which I suggest holds human hair.

The reason I include all this detail from the three Tuamotuan godhouses is to show the importance of sennit and hair, and that the wrapping, for example of the small packages in the Copenhagen godhouse, is unnecessarily long and elaborate, suggesting that it is important in its own right.

More contextual information relevant to these godhouses was provided by Emory. In *marae* Ragihoa, in the Tuamotuan island of Napuka, “on a rack, were installed 10 or 12 miniature god houses, each the possession of one of a group of kin into which the tribe was divided, and each attended by the *tuakana*, or eldest male member of that group” (Emory 1947:8). Further, Emory translated a passage from Montiton (1874:366):

At the center of the platform [*ahu* of the *marae*] they installed horizontally on forked sticks,¹⁴ small cradles or coffers, carved and decorated, in which they conscientiously preserved tufts of hair or of beard, even nails and teeth, removed from bodies of men before interment, to render them an idolatrous cult. They were all carefully tied in little packages with coconut-fiber cord and covered with bird feathers. Each cradle or coffin contained several of these little packages. It was, one might say, the portable mausoleum of the family, a safeguard for the family, a memorial for the entire tribe. They were ordinarily piled up in a house [*fare heiau*, or *fare maitu*] constructed for this purpose near the *marae*. But, upon the occasion of a religious or patriotic ceremony, they were taken from the general depot, and after dusting and decorating them, they were placed on or near the *marae*, so that every warrior could venerate his ancestors and not neglect to make a sacrificial offering of food during the occasion. (Emory 1947:22)

Emory continued: “At Napuka, in 1870, [Father] Fierens followed a road which led him to a *marae* where he saw a ‘dozen boxes in forms of coffins’ and in the same year he saw *maraes* at Tatakoto ‘furnished with small boxes resembling coffins and enclosing hair of ancestors or feathers of rare birds’” (Emory 1947:22, quoting Fierens). The Rev. Père Hervé Audran, from Fakahiva in the Tuamotus, explained that *fare tini atua* was “a kind of reliquary in which was deposited the hair of the dead, whom it was desired to honor. It was these bunches of hair (*huruhuru tagata*) that formed, scarcely fifty years ago [before 1918], the chief objects of adoration in our Polynesian islands... [and] that the hair, for the most part, was white” (quoted in Emory 1947:23). In addition, Audran noted that the *fare tini atua* held a sacred stone, which was laid for some minutes on a turtle before cutting its throat, and some were reported by Byron in 1765 to hold human bones.

Emory concluded his discussion of symbols of deified ancestors by noting that “locks of hair, mounted on or in a stick, served as a means of keeping in touch with the *rigorigo* or spirit of the deceased person from whom the hair was taken”. These sticks were augmented with white or, especially, red feathers tied with coconut fibre sennit (1947:31). He hypothesised that:

Tuamotuans may also have had sennit images, for at Vahitahi we were told of images called *kaha*, having something of the form of a crayfish, ‘made of

feathers, fish bones, etc., and bound up with sennit.’ In a Vahitahi version of the prayer delivered when the turtle is offered at the marae, occurs ‘he tiki makoha’ (a *makoha* image). At Hao, *makoha* means braided or put together, or is applied to a bunch of coconut fibers prepared for cordage. Hence, *tiki makoha* may be an image of braided sennit, like the Tahitian *to‘o*. (Emory 1947:30)

Given the information derived from the X-ray of the Vatican godhouse, this appears to be the case. Thus, we have three similar Tuamotu godhouses, which are reminiscent of Tahitian godhouses and with similar contents.

TWO TUAMOTUAN TO‘O (?)

In Tatakoto in 1870 Father Fierens noted the existence of a “few idols of wood” (quoted in Emory 1934:14), and in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution are two objects from the Tuamotus that, I suggest, are Tuamotuan versions of *to‘o*. These two objects, which were collected in 1839 by the United States Exploring Expedition, consist of oblong-shaped pieces of wood (said to be *tou*), wrapped in plain white barkcloth (Fig. 19). They are listed by Titian Peale in the catalogue of the United States Exploring Expedition Collection in the Smithsonian Institution as: “Pieces of wood worn in front of their bodies by men of the Disappointment Islands [Napuka] while dancing.” While this is possible, it does not rule out that they may represent gods, just as barkcloth covered human figures were worn by chiefs in Rapa Nui (Kaeppler 2003:28). The objects are similar to Tahitian *to‘o*—wider at one end and almost entirely covered with barkcloth, whose fineness is similar to early Tahitian barkcloth in Cook-voyage collections. The Tuamotuans were not known for making barkcloth, so it is likely that these pieces came from Tahiti and were, perhaps, pieces of *hopu‘u* or *pu‘upu‘u* barkcloth. The object would acquire divinity



Figure 19. Two barkcloth covered Tuamotuan *to‘o* (?). Collected in Napuka, Tuamotu Islands, in 1839 during the U.S. Exploring Expedition. Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: James DiLoreto, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

as sacred barkcloth from Tahiti was attached to the wooden interior piece by a Tuamotuan religious expert in conjunction with prayers. It is important to remember here that things need not look alike to be alike.

ARE THE GODS, GODHOUSES, AND THEIR CONTENTS RELATED?

To return to questions posed at the beginning of this paper: Are the godhouses in the Vatican and the British Museum related to each other and which gods, if any, did they contain? I think there is no doubt that all the containers that I have mentioned are related to each other by style and by the same concept of holding relics (especially hair and teeth) of ancestors and fabricated objects to represent them. The Tuamotu godhouses were thatched or wrapped with pandanus leaves and sennit, and held remains of one's immediate ancestors, such as hair; the Tahitian wood container held a sennit-covered object, which contained a piece of wood or dense fibrous materials, and in which teeth, hair, and feathers were encased, and were wrapped with barkcloth and pandanus leaves. There is yet a further similarity. Emory (1947:99) notes that in the Tuamotus, after death chiefs or leading warriors were converted into *maitu* 'ancestor gods'. "When the body was sufficiently desiccated a funeral cortege was formed, led by the *tahuga* [religious expert],

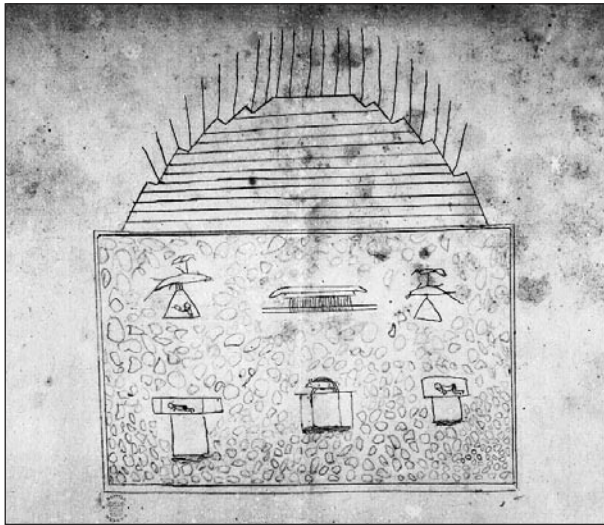


Figure 20. Drawing of a typical *marae* in the Society Islands, by the priest Tupaia, 1769. British Library Add. Ms 15508, f. 14 (no.16).
(© The British Library. All rights reserved.)

which proceeded to the marae... [where] it was deposited upon a scaffold-like shelf in the *ana*. The position of the corpse was horizontal—extended with arms lying on the stomach, palms down. It was wrapped up with sennit.” Prayers were said, the body was decorated, and the corpse became a full-fledged *maitu*. That is, the body was like a large-scale Tahitian *to ‘o*, including even details like the placement of the hands (see Fig. 7). Tuamotu corpses were treated similarly to Tahitian corpses as described by Henry, which were placed in the forecourt of *marae* (Fig. 3).

Emory (1934:18) noted that: “The maraes of the western Tuamotus differ little from the inland maraes of Tahiti and Moorea”. I would add that the material and verbal elements that implant the divine are also similar. That the *fare tini atua* were also important in the Society Islands’ *marae* is shown by the depiction of such a godhouse in a drawing of a typical *marae* with its accoutrements done by the Society Islands’ priest Tupaia (Fig. 20).

OTHER SACRED OBJECTS

Other sacred objects, probably entangled with prayers, include bunches of feathers and leaf charms. Beechey, who visited the Tuamotus in 1826, noted that in Vahitahi an important article, which would not be parted with, was “a stick with a bunch of black tern feathers suspended to it” (quoted in Emory 1947:35). Two of these sacred objects were collected in Napuka during the voyage of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, and are now in the Smithsonian Institution (Fig. 21). These are described as “flattened, wooden handle, partially wrapped with coconut fiber cord with the split black feathers of the



Figure 21. Two wood pieces with feather attachments. Collected during the U.S. Exploring Expedition in 1839. Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: James DiLoreto, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)



Figure 22. Coconut fibre cord with six attachments of bunches of feathers. Collected during the U.S. Exploring Expedition in 1839. Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: James DiLoreto, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

man of war [frigate] bird, used as a fly whisk". The flywhisk information comes from the Peale Catalogue of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, but it seems more likely that these were sacred objects that were carried and moved ("whisked") in a performative manner. A third related piece is described as an ornament. It consists of a long twisted and braided coconut fibre cord with six bundles of split black feathers of the man-of-war bird attached to it (Fig. 22). Perhaps this was the outer layer of sacred wrapping for a sacred container.

Finally, also important to our subject, are the Tuamotu leaf charms or sacred tassels called *takaikai*. "*Takaikai* as a verb means to wind round and round, to bind in tightly again and again. The term is probably applied to the sacred tassels because they are thought to capture and hold sacredness or the essence of a prayer or charm" (Emory 1947:37).¹⁵ A ceremony witnessed by William Bligh in Tahiti, shows that:

one entire coconut-leaf object serves for one prayer, being taken up at the end of the prayer and left with the representation of the god. But were the function of these objects merely to keep track of the prayers to make sure none had been omitted, plain sticks, stones, or leaves would have served as well. The twisted leaves were probably intended to enmesh and hold the prayer. (Emory 1947:38)

Like the *takaikai*, that activated and reactivated Tuamotuan gods, I suggest that the short strips of twisted/braided sennit that were attached to Society Islands *to 'o* and included inside their outer covering were individual prayers. Indeed, it was the prayers, entangled into the sennit as it was being made or

attached to a piece of wood or other object, as well as the additions of hair and feathers, that transformed an object into a *maitu* (ancestor god). For similarities, I look elsewhere in East Polynesia.

WRAPPING TO ACTIVATE OBJECTS ELSEWHERE IN EAST POLYNESIA

The integral association between the activation of objects by the addition of sacred materials and chanting can be appreciated by examining a ritual associated with the so-called ‘godsticks’ of the New Zealand Māori. These *whakapakoko* are pointed wooden pegs about 18 inches [46cm] long with a human head carved at the top. According to the Rev. Richard Taylor (1870:212):

These images were only thought to possess virtue or peculiar sanctity from the presence of the god they represented when dressed up for worship; at other times they were regarded only as bits of ordinary wood. This dressing consisted in the first place of the *pahau*, or beard, which was made by a fringe of the bright red feathers of the *kaka* parrot, next of the peculiar cincture of sacred cord with which it was bound; this mystic bandage was not only tied on in a peculiar way by the priest, who uttered his most powerful spells all the time he was doing it, but also whilst he was twisting the cord itself, and lastly, painting the entire figure with the sacred *kura* [red ochre]; this completed the preparation for the reception of the god who was by these means constrained to come and take up his abode in it when invoked.

These *whakapakoko* were regarded as vessels for the god to enter, in contrast to most other Māori carvings that were considered ancestor figures that exerted certain influences over people’s lives. As I understand it, these representations of gods and ancestors were only considered containers of divinity when they were activated by the process of wrapping with hair, feathers and cordage in conjunction with chanting.

Rarotonga staff gods, with their huge vestments of barkcloth, sennit and red feathers, were activated/renewed by these materials on occasions sacred to the gods. Mangaian images had vestments that activated them, and the braiding of the sennit was associated with the god Tāne. In Hawai‘i, a temple ceremony, called *kauila huluhulu*, focused on re-adorning the images with feathers (Pukui and Elbert 1985:135). The *kahuna* braided sacred cords called ‘*aha*’ of coconut-fibre sennit while at the same time they chanted prayers. According to Kamakau (1991:162-63), the “‘*aha kapu*’ was made of the braided fibers of coconut husks, the size of horse rope.... It was a fathom or more in length. All of the chief’s priests concentrated their prayers on it as it was being made under *kapu*. The priests forbade all those outside to enter, nor could those on the inside go out while the ‘*aha*’ was being put in place, for the penalty was death”.

The resulting braided 'aha cord entangled with prayers could function as an objectified prayer and became a "tool" of the *kahuna* (Kamakau 1976:143). A further explication was given in the *Kuokoa* newspaper in 1884:

The cords were made by chiefs and *kahunas* with the worship of certain gods. They were of sennit braided tight into a rope, some with a depression down the center, some like fish nets, others like the *koko* carrying net for wooden calabashes and still others with fringes. There were many kinds made by chiefs and priests who placed their faith in the gods they worshipped. The chiefs took the sennit cord as a sign of their high rank, of a lineage from the gods and also to observe the *kapu* of the priesthood. (Translation in Hawaiian Ethnological Notes in Bishop Museum Archives)

These cords were used for various sacred purposes including manipulation on the *heiau*, as a validation of rank; and, after death, those associated with high chiefs were used in making their sennit caskets. The Hawaiian concept of 'aha refers not only to cordage made of plant fibres (especially coconut fibre), human hair or animal intestines, but also to a "prayer or service whose efficacy depended on recitation under taboo and without interruption (Pukui and Elbert 1985:5). Hawaiian feathered cloaks and one of the two main types of helmet had a netted backing made from *olonā* fibre (*Touchardia latifolia*) with the technique of a fisherman's knot, similar to that used for making fishing nets. In a separate task, the feathers were tied to the net in small bunches with a binding thread. The term for feathered capes and cloaks is 'ahu'ula 'red shoulder garments' ('ahu 'shoulder garment', 'ula 'red'). Early capes and cloaks were primarily red, derived from feathers of the 'i'iwi bird (*Vestiaria coccinea*); designs in yellow, green or black were incorporated as the feathers were tied into place. The netted foundation was not uniform, and was no doubt made in pieces by several people of varying skill before being sewn together. I believe that the process of making the netting by designated men of rank, probably priests, gave the finished piece a sacred protective power (Kaeppler 1985:118-20). As in the making of 'aha cords, prayers could be entangled into the backing, and as elsewhere in Polynesia, the addition of red feathers gave it even greater sanctity. From examining the netting it can be seen that 18th-century long feather cloaks were made first as capes and were later enlarged into larger capes or cloaks. I believe that these stages coincided with the renewal of sanctity when the garment was to be worn for a major encounter, just as a *heiau* might be renewed for a specific event. The cape now in Sydney (see Kaeppler 1978:59) was renewed by adding long frigate bird and cock feathers over the original red and yellow design. Feathered helmets offered protection for the sacred top of the head. The

base of a helmet was intertwined 'ie'ie (*Freycinetia arborea*) vine activated by the addition of red feathers. Some helmets were entirely covered with feather-covered cords similar to 'aha cords, and feather-covered cords were sometimes attached to the edges of the helmets.

MATERIAL EXPRESSIONS OF INTANGIBLE KNOWLEDGE

Although these objects themselves are of great interest, the final point of my essay is the importance of the performative/theatrical element of unwrapping, presentation and re-wrapping as a main ingredient of the sacred product. Recall Henry's description above of how Tahitian *to'o* were periodically activated or renewed in a *pa'iatua* ritual, during which the gods were assembled, uncovered and re-dressed at a national *marae* for important occasions or at times of crisis. The *marae* was cleaned, the sacred white *pu'upu'u* barkcloth was prepared, and the cordage sacred to the god Tāne was readied. The god figures were carried to the *marae*—the *to'o* in his godhouse, and then at a sacred moment it was taken out and revealed. The lesser gods were presented to the *to'o* along with offerings of red feathers; the *to'o*, in turn, gave feathers to the lesser gods. The old vestments of the *to'o* were removed, placed in an especially sacred spot on the *marae* and left to decompose, and new vestments were readied—all in conjunction with the chanting of the priests. The wood part of the *to'o* (if there was one) was rubbed with scented coconut oil and a sacred male pig was sacrificed. The *to'o* was dressed in its new vestments of fine sennit, barkcloth and red feathers, and reactivated with chanting.

Imagine the scene as the *to'o* were refurbished. Each *to'o* was unwrapped and rewrapped with barkcloth, short strips of sennit were attached as objectified prayers, perhaps another layer of sennit was added along with feathers and pandanus leaves, and the entire process was accompanied by chanting. Imagine further, the theatricality of opening a Tuamotu godhouse, inserting the new relics, and encasing it again with pandanus leaves and sacred sennit to the chanting of prayers. Here we find the usual Polynesian integration of visual and verbal arts in a performance, in this case a sacred performance. The preparation of the sennit or pandanus leaves, in both Tahiti and the Tuamotus, was done in conjunction with prayers. I believe that, like elsewhere in East Polynesia, the object/product captured the process of praying. The product became sacred because of the process and became an objectified prayer. On each ritual occasion, the product was reactivated by the process. Indeed, it was not the object itself that was of most importance (the ability

to make one would not be rare), but the *process* of making and presenting it in a theatrical setting by a specialised religious practitioner. The importance of the performative element is found throughout East Polynesia. Consider, for example, the performance of the “chief mourner” in the Society Islands. The elaborate ritualised performance was a spectacular theatrical display of grief at the death of a chief or other important person. A priest or close relative of the high-ranking deceased brandished a shark-tooth-edged stave, and wore an elaborately constructed costume accompanying himself with a pair of pearl shell clappers. Making the pieces of the costume and dressing the chief mourner in it were time-consuming and most likely carried out in conjunction with prayers. To behold the chief mourner was to experience the intangible made visible.

The objectification of prayers was recorded for Tahiti by 20 pages of Orsmond’s (1862) Tahitian manuscript, which are devoted to entries concerning ‘*aha*, the braiding and use of coconut-fibre sennit and the importance of activation with red feathers and chanting. These entries show that ‘*aha* was not just an object, but a process as well. For example, ‘*aha atua* was not only the sennit used to make a god, but also “the whole round of prayers offered to him” (Orsmond 1862). Similar processes were recorded by Emory for the Tuamotus.

Much has been made about the competition to obtain specific ‘Oro images, as known from the historic literature (see Claessen 1995:283, Kooijman 1964:113-14). I suggest, however, that the real competition was to obtain specific images that had been consecrated in specific theatrical performances, with specific prayers, by specific priests, all of which made them important. Setting aside the political significance of such images, we reposition the artistic product and especially the performative process to centre stage.

I conclude that it is a combination of product and process that makes objects sacred and divine, and that the performative elements of the process are most important to give divinity to the containers themselves as well as to what they contain. What was needed for a *pa’iatua* ritual, for example, were (i) an object of consolidated fibrous material (preferably one that had been used for the same purpose previously), (ii) sennit with entangled prayers, (iii) red and/or yellow or black feathers, and, most importantly, (iv) a priest and an audience. The verbal prayers were captured in the material object where they became a manifestation of divinity and could be stored until again needed by the divine.

APPENDIX – DOCUMENTATION OF FOUR *TO‘O* IMAGES

Notes by Kenneth Emory in the Bishop Museum accession records for B10548 a–d (abridged and edited by Adrienne Kaeppler). See Figs 23a–z.

Society Is. Orofere Valley, Tahiti, Paea district. [Four *to‘o* were] taken from a bluff-shelter, in 1925, by K.P. Emory. Site: In the valley wall east of the paved platform at Amou, 2.5 miles within the valley of Orofere, Site 26 in *Stone Remains in the Society Is.* (p.70). It is located at the top of a long talus slope, which extends from the bottom of the valley to the first bluffs on the east side. A young Tahitian pig hunter stumbled onto the sennit image no.B10548d lying in the open below the burial niche, and also the length of bamboo, no.B9285, lying nearby. He led Mrs. Emory [who was Tahitian/Tuamotuan] and myself [KPE] to the site in 1925. Mr. Skinner of New Zealand and I revisited the site in 1931, finding great difficulty in recognizing it, as it was overgrown with brush and seemed to have been recovered by landslides. The floor from which Mrs. Emory and I had taken the bundle of images, we could not recognize at all. In 1925 we had collected several skulls from this site, in 1931 no bones were visible.

Near the exposed *to‘o* was a bundle that turned out to have three more *to‘o*, which were unwrapped and photographed after they arrived at Bishop Museum. These are B10548 a,b,c.

THE BUNDLE [Figs 23a–i]: This was firmly imbedded in the dry dust of the floor—only one corner projecting. It measures 2 feet long, 10 inches wide, 6 inches thick. The outermost covering consists of whole pandanus leaves laid on longitudinally, their pointed ends towards the small end of the bundle [Figs 23a–e]. The right edge of each leaf was laid over the left to the right. The bundle was tied by a flat 3-ply coir braid, .3 inches in width, [blank] inches long. This cord had been wrapped three times around the middle, lengthwise, then, a third of a distance from the top, wrapped around the bundle five times, then a half-hitch around itself and 2 or 3 long cords on the back [Fig. 23a], then passing up on to the 3 vertical bands above where it was twisted under, over, and under, and then carried up to the topmost vertical bands of sennit wrappings where it was tucked under.

The wrapping of pandanus leaves began at the middle, passed to the right around the bundle and overlapped the start of the wrapping by 4 inches [Fig. 23d]. The points of the leaves had been cut off sharply at the base of the bundle [Fig. 23e]. It was sewed with 2 ply twisted *fau* (hibiscus) twine, 1/8 inch in diameter. The needle for sewing consisted of the mid-rib of a coconut leaf, around the base of which was wrapped an untwisted end of the *fau* twine. One of these needles was found still tied to the end of the lowest cord.

The sewing was done by passing the cord (twine) thru longitudinal pairs of slits, at a distance of $\frac{1}{4}$ to 1 inch, in a horizontal row [Fig. 23e]. There are 4 bands of sewing: the topmost begins at the left hidden edge, and passes clear through to the other edge. Both ends of this upper band have rotted away. The second sewing commenced at the right edge, passed to the left edge, where the cord was tied by a simple knot, then passed up 4 inches along the left edge and sewed in back to the right edge. The beginning of the cord was then tied to it and the free end, then passed around the bundle once and a half and tucked under [Fig. 23d]. Tied to the unsewed part of the cord and directly in the middle of the front of the bundle, is a piece of coconut fibre twine which undoubtedly marked the attachment of a bunch of feathers. The knotted end of the lowest band of sewing was tied around with a knot, and the sewing carried towards the right. At the right edge of the wrapping, the twine was knotted in a simple knot, and the free end then wrapped partly around the lower end of the bundle and then twined twice about the cords of the middle sewing.

The wrapping of pandanus leaves was pulled off like an envelope, once the outer lashings had been untied. It was found that a strip of coconut leaf sheath reinforced the front part of the envelope [Fig. 23e]. The envelope removed, revealed an inner bundle [Fig. 23f].

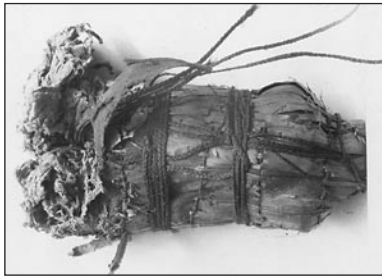
The inner bundle was wrapped in tapa and bound by a spirally wound coir braid .3 inches wide, 2 fathoms long [Figs 23f–h]. The cord had been pieced out at the upper end by tying on a piece 1 foot long. Their ends were joined by a reef knot. The wrapping braid was nowhere tied. The lower end was held tight by being tucked under one of the spirals. The tapa of the outer cover is white, thick, and soft. Taking off this, three wrapped *to'o* were revealed within [Fig. 23i]. The *to'o* that became B10548a was large with black sennit; B10548b was large with plain sennit; and B10548c was the small one in the middle.

The right *to'o*: B10548a, is 16.5 inches long [18in / 45.7cm]; 3.3 inches maximum diameter [Figs 23o–t]. This was wound with 3-ply coir braid .2 inches in width, 4 fathoms long. A loop and slip knot had been made around the lower end, and at the top. The end had been merely pushed around one of the turns. Outer wrapping was removed to expose the second wrapping of soft white tapa wrapped by plain coir braid (3-ply) .2 inches wide, 6.5 fathoms long [Fig.23o]. It was attached by a slip noose. Wrapped spirally down and back, and tucked in at the end. Inner wrapping [Fig. 23p] of fine white tapa (not watermarked) and coir braid stained black. The exposed image [Fig. 23q] shows a final covering of two sections of pandanus leaf, a piece of red cloth over the eyes [Fig. 23q] and an ostrich plume [?] dyed red placed longitudinally over the body and other feathers [Fig.23r]. There were feather tassels and locks of human hair [Figs 23s–t].

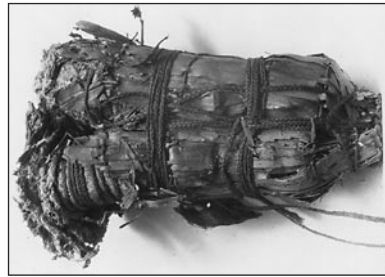
To' o B10548b [Figs 23j–n; 15.75in / 39.9cm], had a loop of sennit round lower end with slip knot, wound spirally and at top, other end merely pushed behind one of the turns [Fig. 23i]. Then two sheets of tapa wrapped round [Fig. 23j]. Another tying of sennit round tapa covering. Commenced at bottom by simple overlap [Fig. 23j]. Different colored sennit joined with reef knot at middle, carried up by spiral turns and caught in at top under turn. Tapa wrapping was folded down at head and up at feet [Figs 23k–l]. Exposed inner wrapping of thin material and sheet of coconut leaf textile over front [Figs 23m–n]. Dr. N. P. Larsen of Queen's Hospital made an X-ray of the god B10548b, *showed no bones, or anything* (my emphasis).

To' o B10,548c is 9.5 inches long [$11\frac{3}{8}$ in / 29cm], maximum diameter 2 inches. It is covered with two-ply twine weave of coir cord [Figs 23u–v].

To' o B10,548d [not part of the bundle] is 16.5 inches long [$16\frac{7}{8}$ inches; 42.8 cm], maximum diameter 3.25 inches. Basketry work of two-pair twine with coir cord. Designs worked out through use of red-stained coir in geometric patterns [Figs. 23 w–x]. [Figure 23w shows the important attachments of numerous twisted strips of sennit, which I have suggested above are objectified prayers. Although not described by Emory, figures y–z illustrate *to' o* B10548d and its wrappings.]



a.



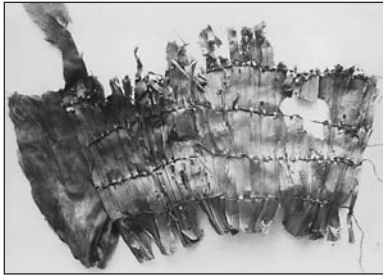
b.



c.



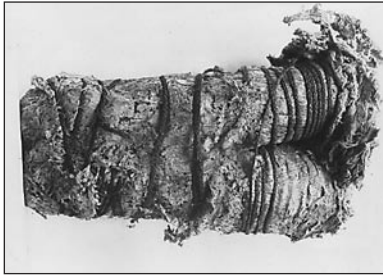
d.



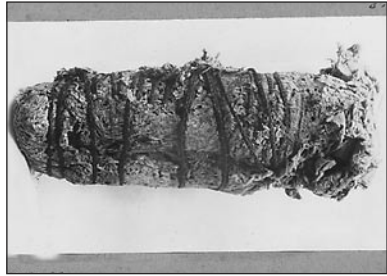
e.



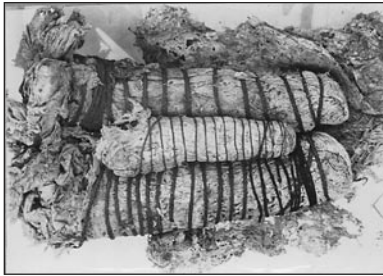
f.



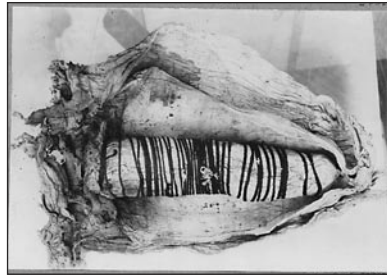
g.



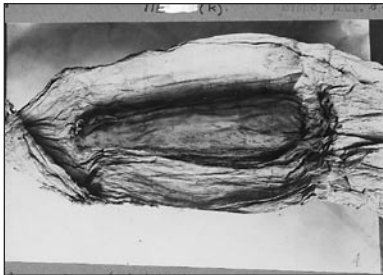
h.



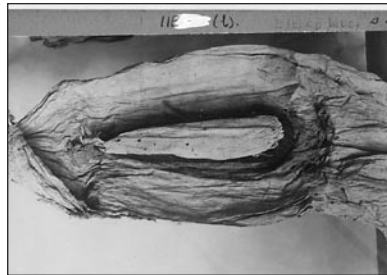
i.



j.



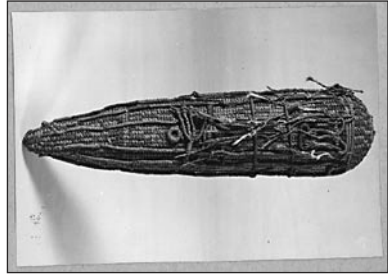
k.



l.



m.



n.



o.



p.



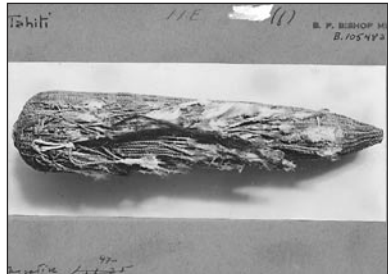
q.



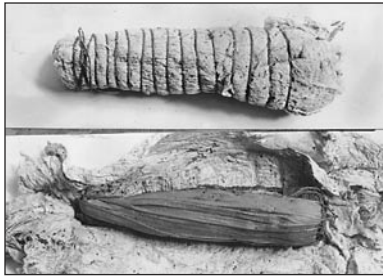
r.



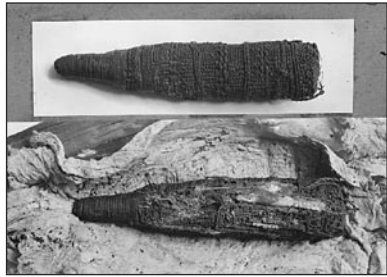
s.



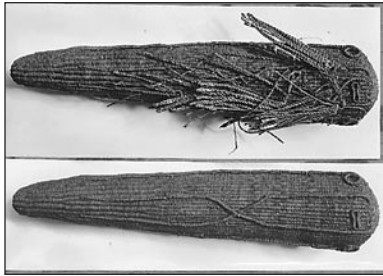
t.



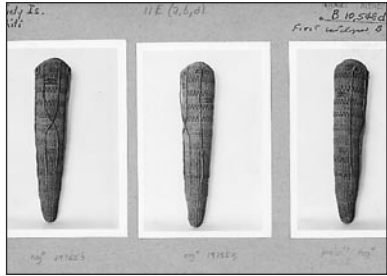
u.



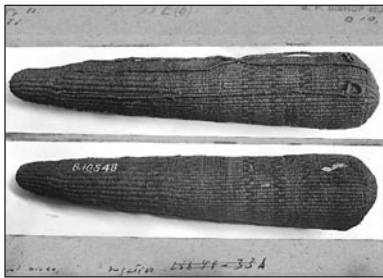
v.



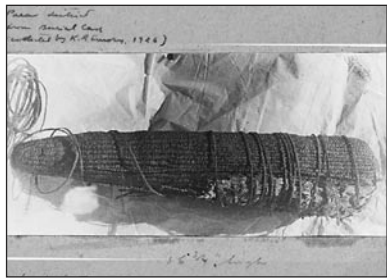
w.



x.



y.



z.

Figure 23. Series of photographs showing various stages of unwrapping three *to'o* found in a bundle and a fourth *to'o* found separately in Orofere Valley, Tahiti, in 1925. (Photos courtesy Bishop Museum.)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is an expanded version of my paper, also called “Containers of Divinity,” presented at the Pacific Arts Association Conference, in Christchurch, New Zealand, in July 2003. I wish to thank Dr. Daniela Serini, for her help with the godhouse in the Vatican; Roger Neich for arranging the CT scans of the *to’o* in the Auckland Museum, and helpful comments; and Betty Kam and Maile Drake for arranging for the X-rays of the *to’o* in the Bishop Museum. I also wish to thank Steven Hooper and the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the University of East Anglia for inviting me as a scholar in residence in May 2006, during which much of this paper was written. The new version was given at the symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition *Pacific Encounters*, and I wish to note the lively discussions about the objects discussed here and other similar objects with members of the symposium.

NOTES

1. “Tahitian” is used in this essay to encompass not only Tahiti itself, but also the neighbouring Windward and Leeward islands of the Society Islands, since the precise origin or place of manufacture of objects is seldom known.
2. Since 1997, I have attempted to obtain photographs of the godhouse from the Vatican. As I have been unsuccessful, I have included in this paper photographs taken by Kenneth P. Emory when the godhouse was in the Lateran Museum in Rome.
3. Anticipating what I suggest below, note that the so-called “godhouse” is actually Ta’aroa’s (empty) body; that is, not just a container for divinity, but divine itself. Note that the sennit is “sacred.” How did it become sacred?
4. See Hooper (2005) for a detailed description.
5. The scans were done by Mercy Radiology, Auckland.
6. Site 26 in Emory’s *Stone Remains in the Society Islands* (1933:70).
7. This is called *kaka* in Tongan. I have not found the term for this material in Tahitian.
8. I wish to thank Betty Kam, Vice President for Collections at the Bishop Museum, and Maile Drake, Collections Manager, for their help in this matter and Sue York of the Castle Medical Center in Kailua, Oahu, for taking the X-rays.
9. I am indebted to Dr. Daniela Serini, who found and translated the records for me.
10. This is the same wood from which many Hawaiian human images were carved.
11. That is, it did not contain an idol, but was considered by them to be an idol itself.
12. However, as will be seen below, it does not have three compartments.
13. The large X-rays taken by the Vatican were consolidated by Don Hurlbert of the Smithsonian Institution.
14. The forked sticks are reminiscent of the scaffolding that holds the dead bodies in Mangareva (Hiroa 1938:497).
15. In the 1970s, when I was preparing for fieldwork in the Tuamotus, Kenneth Emory cautioned me that whenever I went out at night I should always have a Tuamotuan prepare a bracelet with an embedded prayer for me. This would protect me from the spirits on my way home. Unfortunately, my fieldwork in the Tuamotus did not materialise.